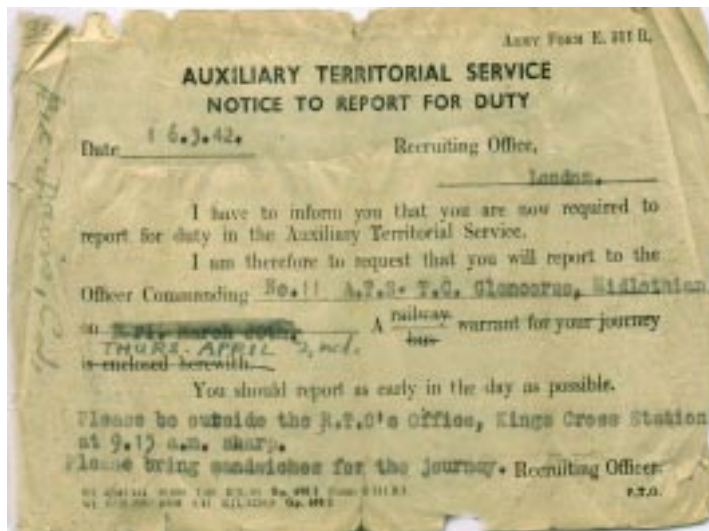


# Defence of Scotland Project

## Introduction

This project is part of the larger Defence of Britain Project which hopes to record as much of the 20th-century military heritage as possible.



We carefully record all prehistoric and medieval military remains in our Sites & Monuments Records, but until lately very little work was accorded to the more recent military heritage. Scotland's importance in the British defensive system should never be under-estimated. In the coastal areas particularly, a number of defences still survive, though many have already been lost. These features, such as gun-emplacements, anti-tank blocks and pill-boxes, were often considered as unsightly, or of little importance, and have been consequently destroyed. It is as important to record these recent military structures as it is to record the medieval and prehistoric

military features - before it is too late.

In Aberdeenshire and Moray small teams of volunteers have been endeavoring to record what they can in their own locality. As well as upstanding structures and sites of buildings, whenever possible they have recorded peoples' memories of their area during the World Wars. It is as important that we speak to people who actually experienced life during the war, as it is to record structures. They are the people with the direct knowledge of events which happened in their own locality. Such knowledge is sometimes surprising, often illuminating. Did you know, for instance, that during World War I a Zeppelin dropped bombs near Dunnideer, at Inch, and that the craters can still be seen?

A copy of records of all upstanding structures, and other sites of interest, has been deposited with the Defence of Britain Project at the Imperial War Museum. Copies of photographs and recordings have been retained for our own Sites & Monuments Record (SMR). We eventually hope to produce a catalogue of all known features relating to the War. This can in future be consulted, along with the SMR, for educational purposes, or by anyone wishing to do research.

## Coastal Defences of north east Scotland

The man responsible for the Coastal defences in the north east of Scotland during World War 2 was Chief Royal Engineer G.A. Mitchell. (1896-1964).

During World War 1 he served with the Royal Engineers as a 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant, based in Palestine, Belgium and England. During the inter war years, he was in the Territorial Army and at the start of World War



2 he was called up and made CRE (Chief Royal Engineer) for the 9<sup>th</sup> Highland Division.

It had been noted that during 1938, that the Graf Zeppelin photographed the north east Scottish coast in great detail in preparation for a possible future invasion. Other German aircraft had also been seen photographing the coast around north east Scotland. Mitchell thought it highly likely that this area would be an ideal site for a beach landing invasion force by the German army, due to its sandy beaches and good communications.

Mitchell was made responsible for defences from River Forth up to Wick. He was a local man and he knew local contractors and the lie of the land. He said: "We must make some effort to show the Germans that we are erecting some form of defences." Important things were "concrete blocks, tubular scaffolding poles and pill boxes", these were the main lines of defence. Everyone was asked to help with the anti-invasion preparations: when soldiers attempted to erect glider traps onto the Royal and Ancient Golf Course at St. Andrews, the local committee initially were against it, but soon agreed to do so.

### Pillboxes

There are numerous types of pillboxes remaining in the north east of Scotland. Many were the type 24; consisting of 6 sides and several gun-loops with one entrance at the back, normally with a ricochet wall inside. These were most commonly used on the beach defences,



defending easily accessible beaches and positioned within eyesight of each other. Other varieties of pillbox were erected all over the north east of Scotland, in-

cluding tank-gun pill boxes.

### Tank Blocks

The pillboxes were often linked together by anti-tank blocks and rolls of barbed wire. The

tank blocks were mostly of a simple 3 foot cube, reinforced concrete often with stones set in the top as camouflage.



The tank blocks were built in situ, as the builders moved along the beach constructing these structures, local school children



took great pride in scratching their names into the still wet concrete.

### Mine Fields

There were many mine fields laid out on the sandy beaches, placed by the Royal Engineers. Unfortunately, accidental mine explosions were responsible for several civilian fatalities along the coast, as well as a number of farm animals that

wandered onto the mines by accident.

### Barbed Wire

Was laid out in 3 rolls in a triangular shape, 2 rolls on the bottom and one along the top. The remnants of rusty



barbed wire has stained the sand dunes brown in numerous areas along the coast.

### Gun emplacements

Several concrete gun emplacements have survived, some of the most impressive of the remaining structures perhaps being those on the Moray coast. These contained two 6" gun emplacements, three engine rooms and two search light emplacements.

## Tank walls

A 1 kilometer long tank wall was built across Newburgh sand dunes, consisting of a mound/ditch and a large steel pole scaffolding wall. Remains today are



very corroded, but the outline is still visible.

## Airfields

During World War 1 “Lenabo Airship Station” (Royal Navy Airship Station Longside) was built to give allied shipping additional protection from German U-boats patrolling in the North Sea. Commissioned in 1915 it was built on a vast peat bog. Lenabo consisted of 3 large airship sheds 100ft high, and several dozen smaller buildings, wind break walls, gasometers etc. It was decommissioned in 1920 with the general loss of interest in airships. The land was sold to developers and nearly all the buildings were destroyed and planted with forestry in 1920-30s.

During World War 2 there were some 16 airfields along the North East coast. These were used for several different purposes, including Operational Training Units, Fighter Command, Bomber Com-

mand and Coastal Command and even some decoy airfields.

RAF Lossiemouth, still in use as a modern NATO airfield was one of the major airfields in the North of Scotland during World War 2. Lossiemouth was base for the bombing raids that eventually destroyed the German Battleship Tirpitz on 12<sup>th</sup> November 1944 using the famous “Tallboy” bombs designed by Barnes Wallis.

## The Cowie Line

The Cowie Line consisted of a tank defence line constructed during WW2 along the River Cowie from Stonehaven into the neighbouring Grampian foothills. The Cowie Line was a bottle neck along the north east Scottish coast. Assuming that a German invasion force had breached the coastal defences to the north, the invading force would have to travel south across the Cowie line, where it was hoped a suitable resistance could be put up to give defending forces time to regroup. This defensive line consisted of artificially steepened hillslope bases and revetted embankments along the river and several pillboxes and tank traps guarding the routes across the river.

## Royal Observer Corps posts



ROC posts often consisted of simply a tent or a wooden hut, with some of concrete a few of which remain today. These posts manned by volunteers were the ears of the Nation, listening to the skies for aircraft movement and plotting allied and enemy aircraft across the country. Over 40 ROC posts are recorded within the north east of Scotland.

## Auxillary Units

Members of the secretive Auxillary units were recruited for their knowledge of the surrounding countryside and ability with firearms.

Memories of one Auxillary Unit member: He was a member of the Home Guard and volunteered for special duties, not



knowing exactly what he was letting himself in for.

There were 5 or 6 men in the special unit, under the disguise of being Home Guard members. They were called the “Demolition Squad” but were really the framework of a resistance movement set up in 1939 in fear of an invasion.

A dug out was constructed in a wood north of the village by the regular army. This dug out was stocked with food,

the latest of weapons and plastic explosives which were quite rare at this time. The local farmer happened to discover this hide out in the wood and he was forced to sign the “Secrets Act” forbidding him to speak about such goings on. None of his family knew of these happenings, but his wife had suspicions something was amiss. He went on courses to the Headquarters, which were located near Swindon, at least he thought they were the Headquarters, but of course he wasn’t told such things. These units or “Demolition Squads” as they were called were mostly made up of farm workers, game keepers, poachers or people connected with rural life. The village unit trained with other neighbouring village units. The unit members had to get special leave from their employers to attend courses and training which caused a lot of difficulties, as you could not give the proper reason.

## Commando Training

Commando Units and other troops were trained in the north east of Scotland for sorties on Norway. The following pic-



ture shows a group of Polish soldiers cross-country ski training in the Grampian Mountains.

The Cairngorm Mountains offered perhaps the most suitable terrain for cross-country ski training. Numerous units were trained in mountain warfare in this region, based in a large training camp in Braemar (now a caravan site).

## Lumber Camps

The picture below is of a timber bridge across the River Dee built during WW2 by the Canadian Forestry Corps.

Canadian lumberjack volunteers were formed into the Canadian Forestry Corps and were posted in various locations around Grampian to fell timber. They were often billeted in wooden



huted camps in various locations. The requirement for timber meant that parts of several ancient woodlands in Grampian were felled during the war.

## Prisoner of War camps

There were about 19 POW camps based in the north east of Scotland. There were several main camps with numerous satellite camps to take the overflow. There appears to be a general

trend in the history of these camps; at the start of their use, they held mostly Italian POWs from the North Africa Campaigns. Many Italian prisoners were lent out to the local farmers as a workforce, where in general they worked and behaved well. Local farmers would often supplement the POWs rations with food from the farm. One Italian prisoner who stole a bicycle from the farm where he was working, escaped duly to be recaptured soon after. The bicycle was never returned to the farmer. Later in the war, German prisoners started to fill up the campsites, who were also lent out to work on local farms. After the end of the war, a number of camps retained their German guests, as they were unwilling to return to their homeland, it having been captured by the Soviet Army.

## Reminiscences

### Sphagnum Moss

During WW1 the collection of sphagnum moss was organised from the area of Deochry and Bunzeach. The moss was laid out to dry on wire netting, and used in the manufacture of wound dressings for the front lines.

### Evacuees

The Strathdon area received numerous evacuees from around the British Isles, but most came from the Maryhill area of Glasgow. Quite a lot of the evacuees didn't stay long in the area because they missed the city comforts of chip-shops and cinemas. One evacuee mother who was seen waiting for a grocery van, was told that unfortunately the van was not

due until the day after, to which she replied “I’d rather return to Glasgow and be bombed to death than stay in Strathdon and starve to death”.

#### Telephone exchange

The postmistress in Strathdon was allowed 15 seconds to answer telephone

calls during the war years. This meant that she slept on a camp bed beside the exchange. Test calls were put through to check that the calls were being answered within the 15 seconds allowed. She received a decoration after the war for her services to the community.

